

Trump's Bankrupt Syria Policy: Civilians Will Pay the Price

Trump's decision confirms the decline of US power in the Middle East and globally.

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The Trump administration decision to allow Turkey to have a free ride in Rojava, North-East Syria opens the door for new disasters for all, especially the civilians on the ground. More, it confirms the decline of US power in the Middle East and globally.

Marred by the openings of an impeachment process at home backed by senior democratic and republican elites, on 6th October 2019 Trump's White House declared that the US troops would be withdrawing from northern Syria, and will no longer be in the immediate area ahead of a Turkish military operation. It also added that the US will not support or be involved in the operations, and that Turkey now would be responsible for the fate of all captured Islamic State fighters ([totaling 12000 men and 70000 women and children](#)) during the last two years, currently held by the Kurdish-led Syrian Defence Forces (SDF), a group of Kurdish and Arab militias. Trump justified his decision by saying that the US deployment of troops in northern Syria was simply too costly.

"The Kurds fought with us, but were paid massive amounts of money and equipment to do so (...). They have been fighting Turkey for decades. I held off this fight for almost 3 years, but it is time for us to get out of these ridiculous Endless Wars, many of them tribal, and bring our soldiers home (...). Turkey, Europe, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Russia and the Kurds will now have to figure the situation out", Trump [added](#).

This was followed by a characteristic twitter warning to Turkey:

"As I have stated strongly before, and just to reiterate, if Turkey does anything that I, in my great and unmatched wisdom, consider to be off limits, I will totally destroy and obliterate the Economy of Turkey (I've done before!). They must, with Europe and others, watch over...the captured ISIS fighters and families. The U.S. has done far more than anyone could have ever expected, including the capture of 100% of the ISIS Caliphate. It is time now for others in the region, some of great wealth, to protect their own territory. THE USA IS GREAT!" [Donald J. Trump @[realDonaldTrump](#), 7 October 2019].

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Turkey, however, through its Vice-President, Fuat Oktay, [said](#) that

“Ankara is the one who would determine our own path and set our own limits.”

In his tweets, Trump declared that it is now Turkey’s responsibility to look after ISIS prisoners. But Ankara may have other plans and ideas and, as experience teaches us, the logic of the actual warfare leads military planners to change plans and, at times, even move beyond the endorsed political framework of action.

The decision of the US is simply saying that the US troops will not stand in the way of the planned Turkish operations against the Kurdish controlled area, approximately one-third of Syrian territory in the northeast of the country. An autonomous administration, under the control of the Kurdish-led SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces), controls this region, North and East Syria, described as *Rojava*. The region gained its *de facto* autonomy in 2012, taking advantage of the Syrian forces partial withdrawal from Kurdish areas. It is home to Kurdish, Arab, and Assyrian populations, alongside smaller numbers of Turkmens, Armenians, Yazidis and Circassians.

Donald Trump announced the intention of withdrawing the US troops from the region in December 2018, claiming that since the IS (Islamic State) was close to complete defeat there was no reason for the US troops to stay there any longer. Following this, the US administration came to an [agreement](#) with Turkey to establish a 10-15 km wide safe zone, so called *peace corridor*, along the Turkish-Syrian border in northern Syria. As a result, in August 2019, some of the Kurdish forces [removed](#) their posts and left this zone to the joint control of American and Turkish troops.

It seems that this was not enough to satisfy the security concerns of the Turkish side. Turkey has openly and continuously criticised the US for supporting the Kurdish militia, YPG (Kurdish People’s Protection Units), which Turkey considers a terrorist entity, an extension of the militant Kurdish political movement in Turkey, PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party), with which the Turkish forces have been at war for more than 30 years. On 24 September, Turkey’s president Tayyip Erdogan [told](#) the UN General Assembly that Turkey has a detailed plan for this region: to set up a safe zone along 480 km (300 miles) of border and reaching 32 km deep inside Syria, from the Euphrates River in the west to the border with Iraq in the east, essential to ensure border security for Turkey (see map).

Under the plan, up to 2 million Syrian refugees, currently living in Turkey, would be settled in the safe zone, with international support. If implemented, the project could halve the number of Syrian refugees sheltering in Turkey from Syria’s eight-year long conflict, and drive the Syrian Kurdish militia, YPG, away from the border. The Turkish plan, as explained by Erdogan, includes establishing 140 villages, 10 towns, altogether building more than 200,000 homes, and a university. If materialised, this plan will seriously alter the demographic balance of the region by driving out much of the Kurdish population and replacing them with Turkey-friendly Syrian refugees, most of whom are Arabs. It would also signify partition of Syria and *de facto* extension of Turkish sovereignty beyond its 1923 internationally recognised borders.

Yet, this plan is unlikely to come to fruition, not least because re-settling Arab refugees in a predominately Kurdish area would most likely cause further conflict. This recent situation “could push the Kurds into seeking an arrangement with the Assad regime in Damascus. The Kurdish leadership has long been in talks with Damascus to ensure a level of Kurdish autonomy in north eastern Syria in the event of a US pullout”, “, reported in the [Guardian](#) on 7 October.

So far, public opinion and mainstream media in the West are more interested in speculating answers to the question “Who is the likely winner of a Turkish offensive in northern Syria?”. “Bashar al-Assad is the real winner”, writes *Dana Nawzar Jaf* in the [NewStatesman](#), and [The Asia Times](#) actually report along the same lines. Further, [CNBC](#) asserts that “Trump’s handing northern Syria to Turkey is a ‘gift to Russia, Iran, and ISIS’”, an opinion shared by many other [media outlets and commentators](#). Others argue that [Erdogan tricked Trump](#) and is now having his plan implemented, which is effectively the defeat of the Kurds and the prevention of a Kurdish enclave-administration in Syria, which would inspire Kurds in Turkey to secede. We rate this type of speculation from being unsatisfactory and inaccurate to being deeply misleading.

First of all, northern Syria is not just a military zone occupied by fighters; it is home to between 500,000 and 1 million Kurdish and approximately 1.5 million Arab civilians, Assyrians and Yezidis, many of whom are refugees escaped from the war-zones of Syria and Iraq. The 2014 population estimate of *Rojava* was 4.6 million people. Sandwiched between the Turkish army, Turkey-supported Free Syrian Army and the Kurdish-Arab SDF militias are these large number of civilians, who are now faced with the risk of losing their homes, lands and lives. Many of them have just recently escaped from other areas of Syria and Iraq where heavy fighting directly threatened them. This is the unfortunate fate of the millions of civilians who happen to be born in this geographical area, in those Middle Eastern countries, most of whom have in recent years experienced foreign occupation, violent wars and civil wars.

But is Trump’s move anti-Russian? During the Cold War, in an effort to disentangle Turkey from Soviet influence – Turkey has always been Washington’s bastion in the Middle East and geo-politically far more important than Greece, another NATO ally – the US gave many advantages to the Turkish military – see for example the case of Cyprus, an issue unresolved to the present day. Today, and since the [downing](#) of the Russian warplane by Turkish fire, Turkey and Russia re-discovered friendship and Erdogan made everything in his powers to criticise the US and find a *modus vivendi* with Putin over Assad’s Syria. But, at best, this is not the main reason why Trump’s security team took this important decision.

Trump’s decision and the creation of a massive power-vacuum in Syria will open the door to further disasters for all concerned – primarily the civilian, the poor and the deprived. However, US considerations run deep into the country’s socio-economic decline and fading economic and political standing abroad. The first two Gulf Wars – Operation Desert Storm of 1990 to drive Iraqi forces out of Kuwait and the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq – killed hundreds of thousands, uprooted millions, and unsettled the Greater Middle East, and led to still ongoing chaos and bloodshed. This cost the US administration trillions of dollars that can no longer be fully recovered from America’s “exorbitant privilege”, namely the position of the dollar in global markets as a reserve currency that gives the ability to the US to borrow its own currency in order to re-finance its debt obligations. These defeats are much worse than Vietnam’s, when first the US experienced a serious balance of payments problem and its industry a fall in profitability.

ISIS and the Syrian crisis have their roots in America's failed occupation of Iraq, which deprived the Iraqi Sunnis of any power, previously the dominant faction under Saddam's regime. The Caliphate was the direct result of the decline of US neo-imperialism, rather than an exhibition of its strength. Iran came out to be the winner of America's occupation of Iraq. US power in the Middle East is on the wane, and together the recycling of petrodollars that buttressed US international economic strategy thwarting the bankruptcy of the US. But the global financial crisis, the "fracking revolution" and the assertive economic posture of China in international political economy, coupled with the debt America's neo-imperial wars created from the end of the Soviet Union onwards, defined America's inability to recover both economically and politically. This is the deeper meaning of Trump's decision to let the "Turks, the Russians, the Kurds and the rest" sort it out in Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East.

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